The birth of an Oswald conspiracy

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NEW YORK — Last week the Associated Press carried a story about the Warren Commission. Harold Weisberg, an untiring conspiratorialist, asked that a conversation by the commission be declassified and released, under the Freedom of Information Act. The conversation was, indeed, released — and it concerned reports that Lee Harvey Oswald was an FBI agent. These reports were given a certain verisimilitude and specificity by the mention of a distinct agent's number as belonging to Oswald — No. 179.

The AP story made an oblique reference to a newsman's account in 1974; and though that story did not use the number 179, Weisberg knows very well what it is all about. Most of the AP report, ignoring the journalistic reference, quotes rather idle speculation by commission members (including Gerald Ford) about why the FBI would hire Oswald.

Back in 1967, when I was in Dallas to write about the death of Jack Ruby, I met often with Bill Alexander, the assistant district attorney. Alexander, like many local law enforcement people, hated the FBI. As he put it, "J. Edgar Hoover couldn't track a bleeding elephant across snowfields if it hid in a telephone booth."

BACK IN 1963, Alexander was convinced that the FBI was tapping his telephone, though agents denied this to his face. In order to find out, he arranged with two journalist friends to spring a story so wild it would bring the FBI running — if, indeed, they were listening in. The three men arranged a conference call from Alexander to the newspaper offices of the Dallas Morning News and the Houston Post.

As the conversation wandered on, Alexander asked the two, "Do you remember what Oswald's payroll number was?" The man at the Houston Post said, "I think it was S-172." But Alexander said, no, he thought it was S-179.

Sure enough, within half an hour agents had showed up at all three men's desks, flashing their identification and asking what they knew about a government payroll number for Lee Harvey Oswald. The number, of course, had been picked out of the air, and the whole story made up, to produce just the reaction it did.

THE HOUSTON POST man is now at the Baltimore News-American. His name is Lonnie Hudkins, and in recent weeks he wrote the first account of how he and Alexander made up old 179 for their own purposes. This is the first time he has mentioned that number in print — though he explained it all to the Warren commission long ago. Yet through leaks and documents like the conversation now released, 179 became a number known to conspiracy hunters and led them on many chases.

Back in 1974, the FBI denied there was any such payroll designation for Oswald. To conspiratorialists, that is the high form of truth that there was one. An FBI denial is enough to establish any fact with them.

Alexander must be enjoying the way he used the FBI's own tap against the bureau. But it shows the rest of us how little it takes to build a conspiracy theory. The truly devoted can do it with the slightest of things — or with nothing.